Oral History Cover Sheet

National Heritage Team of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Oral History Program

Subject/USFW Retiree: Aliy Zirkle

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Radio interview by: Not noted (*italicized interviewee*)

Offices and Field Stations worked: Kanuti Refuge- Biotech, John Heinz National Wildlife Refuge, King Salmon National Wildlife Refuge, Alaskan Peninsula National Wildlife Refuge.

Colleagues and Mentors: Barb Armstrong, Mary Maxwell, Patsy Martin, Rachel Brubaker, Cathy Kerby, John Baker

Most important Issues: migratory birds, BBS or Breeding Bird Survey, importance of Wildlife Refuges

Brief Summary of Interview: Growing up in mainland United States, Goes to college for biology, birds become main focus, travels to Alaska to study migration patterns/ breeding, falls in love with the country, Stays and becomes a dog enthusiast/ racer, speaks on importance of Wildlife refuges in Alaska.

Keywords: Birds; Bird banding; Biological control; Education; Employees (USFWS); Environmental quality; Environmental education; Winter sports; Wildlife viewing; Wildlife refuges; Villages; History

Aliy Zirkle:
...on and left.

Well, that was probably smart.

Aliy Zirkle:
No, it was one of those scenarios where it was so windy, you know. I mean of course you run into that a lot in different places. Or it's so windy and it leaves those ridges in the earth, where you think it's always windy up here.

Right, you know, it's actually an Arctic desert in that area. I mean, it's just amazing the amount of drifting you can get in the city street. We lived in a government house on the end of a street, and it was on the east side of town, right next to the lagoon. And the wind comes out of the east constantly in the wintertime and no kidding, there would be drifts like 12-foot tall in our driveway. The city couldn't keep up with the drifts. So there would be a week or two where you were parked like a block away, and you would have to walk every evening and every morning, you know, carry your groceries through the snow drifts!

Aliy Zirkle:
The amazing part to me is that there still are pretty substantial villages out there. I mean, of course there's something ingrained in the people. That that's where they're from and that's where they live and they stay there. But most Kotzebue folks and Nome and Teller and all, you know, shop in Anchorage and know that there are other places, but continue to live there.

They won't trade their lifestyle for anything. A really good friend of ours works in Offices Assistance Management, Barb Armstrong, she's from Kobuk, and she moved to Kotzebue, which was a big change, and the whole time she was in Kotzebue she missed Kobuk. She recently moved to Anchorage, I think it was in like March, and she's just now kind of starting to feel like she's at home, but she still misses the country so much, you know.

Aliy Zirkle:
At least she's got trees back now. Doesn't Kobuk have a bit of trees now?

Yeah, gosh it's just...

Aliy Zirkle:
Sheefish, caribou, and trees.

Yes, it is just beautiful country. That was the thing about Kotzebue, it was just so desolate, no trees. It's like you said, it's windy. It seemed miserable, but you'd go up like to Kobuk or to Noatak and just absolutely stunning.

So I can understand why some people chose to remain in the villages. But for them, I guess life now is much better, more comfortable than it was a hundred years ago.

Aliy Zirkle:
Oh my goodness! And not dying as an elder at age 37, you know. It's very different.

Yeah. So, anyway there's parts of Kotzebue that will keep near and dear in our hearts and always miss. And of course there are things that we will not miss. We feel fortunate to be in Fairbanks, and people in this office are just fantastic employees. Fairbanks is a nice place.

Aliy Zirkle:
Yes, yes, I think so. I mean, I'm a bit outside of it. But moving down here from Bettles, I was kind of in the same boat as you, ready to get out of Bettles and moving out here. I went to Anchorage quite a bit, not as much as you I'm sure, but that kind of scared me, the whole Anchorage thing.

Coming back to Fairbanks it was almost like this envelope, you know; arms around you and welcome home kind of thing, which wasn't as extensive as Bettles. Where some people welcome you home and other people spit at you kind of thing. But Fairbanks seems that way, you know.

Fairbanks is like a big, small town to me. It has about everything you can want for. You know your neighbors and people are pretty friendly. Oh, there's some crime here, but not much.

Aliy Zirkle:
Now see I didn't know you, so it was kind of like, 'Who the heck is this guy?'

When did you leave Kanuti [National Wildlife] Refuge?

Aliy Zirkle:
Oh awhile ago. I worked, oh gosh, probably 1996 I left Bettles, and I worked on and off for Barry Whitehill, kind of before Mary Maxwell got there. Actually, Mary actually was there for the last little while when I was trying to throw some reports together. But I was kind of more back in the day when Patsy Martin was up here. Rachel Brubaker still worked for Fish and Wildlife, that kind of thing.

You were a biologist then?

Aliy Zirkle:
I was actually a biotech for quite some time, and then I stayed in Bettles and ended up probably kind of creating that position that Mary had for a long time. It was on the biologist side of things, as you were doing most of the projects on your own. We had two biologists and then cut down to one. Both of them us and then I think just Lisa took the one. It was nice. It was good, different in the fact that I was the only one up there. But it was good in the sense that I could do a lot of nifty stuff. Take a lot of the data that's been over the last dozen years and come up with stuff because I was pretty interested in looking at especially we had a lot of wolf/moose census information that had never really been looked at.

That is the case at every refuge.

Aliy Zirkle:
Yes, yeah. And I had those long winters, so it was kind of like, 'Heck, why not pull something together.' But then, to tell you the truth, what happened is I got dogs! And I remember calling Barry because he was my supervisor (it was probably December) and I was like, "Okay, so I'm going to take the week off." Barry's response was, "Oh, alright. Where are you going?" I responded with, "Well, I'm not really sure." And then the next week I'm here like, "Okay Barry, I'm taking two days off." It was this fulltime job, but it was kind of like if I had to go to Allakaket and buy carcasses, or I'd go here and do that kind of thing. But if I was lacking motivation to do the job, no one was up there to say, "Okay babe let's go." So I'd be like, 'Well, I think I'm going to take off.' So then I was like, 'Alright, I'm out of here.'

How long did it take you to finally make up your mind?

Aliy Zirkle:
I had doubts for a couple of years before I moved down here. Then I went in one race in Allakaket actually, I came in second to last and decided that I've got to do better than that. And then did it, right there.

Oh wow, that's neat. I was really curious; I mean I knew that you had worked for the Refuge System at Kanuti, and I just wandered what... Because this is great work, but I know people that get into mushing just love it too.

Aliy Zirkle:
I was lucky at Kanuti because I got to do some really great projects. It was the start of the whole... a lot of migratory bird stuff, so we did a lot of traveling and doing breeding bird surveys. Actually, I established those back in 1993, I guess it was, the BBS [Breeding Bird Survey] Route and those kinds of things.

Oh, good for you, great!

Aliy Zirkle:
I was also lucky, because we were doing a lot of moose work, I mean it's constant, but I got to go do Yukon Flat Surveys, Arctic Surveys, down to Galena. So, I was basically very good at flying around the back of a SuperCub and not vomiting! So there you go, ship her anywhere!

I'm the same way, you're in!

Aliy Zirkle:
It's true, it's true. Sometimes you're like, 'Well, darn it!' But it's pretty fun to see all those places, I mean really.

That's I think what keeps most employees coming back here. It's just those. Yeah, I spend a lot of time sitting in here in this big orange building. But when you do get out and fly over the country it's just aw- inspiring and it kind of reenergizes my batteries, and I think it does for a lot of people.

Aliy Zirkle:
Oh yeah, oh yeah. But I figure that what I got to see and experience in the few years that I was involved with it is my lifetime worth of that, really. I mean not that I... I mean I've been... the Arctic calls me all the time, I'm always back to the refuge up there. I mean every spring it's like there's a sense of, 'Oh, you've got to come back up' kind of thing. And then Kanuti, I still have the Bettles connection, so I often times run dogs down to Allakaket. And then honestly with the Quest going all down the Yukon and then the Iditarod, I feel like I'm lucky because I'm no longer... I kind of had the wings of my own with this dog team to travel the vast state, you know, and I'm really lucky that way.

I think so, I think so too. One thing that I miss is that at work you always find yourself always flying over the country. With a dog team, you're actually on the ground and seeing just... you can't really appreciate the vastness of three million acres when you fly over it in a couple of hours.

Aliy Zirkle:
Or the Yukon, I mean I think about so many... I mean flying over the Yukon especially, you know, just going your typical Galena to Fairbanks or something like that and blink, there's the Yukon kind of thing. Driving it by a dog team you're like, 'Oh my goodness, like how long is it going to take me from Ruby to Kaltag?' A long time!

Yeah, and how wide the river is, that's an amazing thing too.

Aliy Zirkle:
Oh yeah, and at night you don't even realize that you're on this big, vast, I mean basically artery of the north.

What a neat occupation that you have.

Aliy Zirkle:
It seems to fit with me right now, to tell you the truth.

Do you call it an occupation?

Aliy Zirkle:
I call it my passion; I think it's gone past an occupation. The problem with it, I mean it is great, is that it's like any kind of self-employment, it's totally all-consuming and that I have a really hard time taking a day off or doing that kind of thing. I don't employ a lot of people at the kennel. I have people who definitely help me. But I still have a bit of the belief that the more work that I do around my dogs, it connects me closer to them. And then I have a more appreciation and obviously a connection to them. So, I'm not to the point where I'm hiring people to clean up all the dog shit and feed all the dogs and that kind of thing. But that's with any kind of self-employment really, I mean the more you want to put into your own business the more you're going to get out of it.

Yes, there's a fine line there.

Aliy Zirkle:
There is, there is. Sixteen hour days get a little old.

Oh my gosh! Well, you probably are itching to get out there; I see the sun starting to come up. Do you want to go ahead and get going?

I guess the first thing we just... So, if you're mom's listening to the radio station or unless she recognizes who you are, if I could have you just introduce yourself and maybe just like your title or what did you do and a little background on yourself.

Aliy Zirkle:
Well hello, I am Aliy Zirkle, and I own SP Kennel. It's a competitive racing and tourism husky sled dog kennel. It's based actually out in Two Rivers, Alaska, which isn't too far from Fairbanks, so interior Alaska.

And why don't you mention what you're most famous for.

Aliy Zirkle:
I've been competitively running long distance sled dog races, long distance being 300 miles to basically 1,000 miles. There are two basically pinnacles of sled dog racing, which is 1,000 mile races; one is the Yukon Quest, which is more northern. It is run in February in interior Alaska when it's dark and cold; and the other is a southern 1,000 mile endurance race and it's the Iditarod, run from Anchorage, one thousand miles west to Nome.

I was fortunate enough to win the Yukon Quest in the year 2000, and I have since then gone on to race the Iditarod in 2001 and 2002, and I hope to win the Iditarod here soon as well. Not too cocky there, huh?

Alright, I'll move down to the next question to kind of lay the groundwork for this PSA Campaign and telling people about your connection with the outdoors. We'll start with maybe your childhood, whenever you got inspired to work in the outdoors, and then we'll move into how long you've been in Alaska and fond memories. And you spent time on Alaskan refuges, which is totally cool, so.

Aliy Zirkle:
I still do, to tell you the truth.

Yeah, are you volunteering then?

Aliy Zirkle:
No, but I find myself up there appreciating it.

Oh, lucky you.

Aliy Zirkle:
Alright, well basically my current lifestyle is about 90% outdoors. As a child I guess I was in the outdoors much of the time, predominantly wandering and exploring. And I am lucky to say that my current lifestyle afforded me that same predicament.

The outdoors, obviously, is where I train. Where I care for, I take care all of my 50 plus Alaska Husky's, who are not only my coworkers but also my companions. So, I'm lucky to be in the outdoors all the time.

Wow, you're lucky, you're very lucky.

Aliy Zirkle:
That's only because you're sitting in the orange building right now.

That's right, but watching the sun rise.

Aliy Zirkle:
And it's not 30-below.

Oh, okay. And how long have you been in Alaska?

Aliy Zirkle:
Actually, I came to Alaska 12 years ago. And interestingly enough, this is my first connection to Fish and Wildlife and the Refuge System.

I was at University, and it was my second year studying as a biologist, and I was living in the city, actually in Philadelphia, which by the way is right near a very nice refuge, bird refuge, Tinicum. I hope it's called Tinicum.

Actually, they changed it to The John Heinz [National Wildlife Refuge].

Aliy Zirkle:
Oh, okay. I just got a little brain freeze.

Something was telling that...

Aliy Zirkle:
That that was wrong, yeah.

Yeah, we had to change names and name it after someone famous now.

Aliy Zirkle:
Well there you go, it was what it was when I was there and there were really nifty birds. Anyway, I decided that the city was a little bit too much for me, and I was looking for somewhere to go for the summer. And basically I came across a volunteer, actually SCA (Student Conservation Association) Project that were looking for some volunteers to go to Alaska to do some bird work. And by golly if they didn't select me to head up, it was in early May I believe, and I headed up straight to King Salmon and the Alaskan Peninsula Becharof National Wildlife Refuge.

I was there until mid-October to tell you the truth. So, it got to be gorgeous, slightly winter, and it was where I first truly said, 'My goodness this is a world that is very special.' So, that was 12 years ago.

Wow, that is a kind of unique story; to go from Philadelphia to Alaska Peninsula Becharof Refuge.

Aliy Zirkle:
Yeah, the Ugashik Narrows was where I lived for six months in a wall tent with three other folks, and it was, it really was great. We actually were there (kind of a typical little government deal) we were there to do a fishing survey. They had basically the best grayling catches and size of fish for years there, and they decided that they were going to do catch and release program, and that was instituted that year. And all of the guides basically, because of the catch and release, which is too bad, decided to go elsewhere. So we really didn't have a lot of interview situations, which is what we were up there for, to do the guide interviews and the client interviews. So, what we ended up doing was kind of taking it upon ourselves to do a bird survey and census of the area. We ended up doing thus a lot of hiking, rafting, and getting around to the different marshes and highlands and that kind of thing in order to document all of the species that we had seen. So, it got me more and more involved with birds, which eventually got me a job with the Refuge System later on.

Oh wow, that was very resourceful too, to change midstream and do a bird survey.

Aliy Zirkle:
Oh yeah, it was great, it was great. It was right when they were still doing a bit of the oil cleanup over on the coast, so we were lucky in that we got to get out and do some foot work on the coast, and got to see and kind of do a little bit of bird work over there as well. Gosh, what a neat place.

Yeah, I look back at all of the experiences you've had, and it leads me to my next question, and I want to say, "What is your most permeable, or most memorable experience?" But you probably have numbers.

Aliy Zirkle:
I have a few. I think I've gotten a true impression of, you know, the vastness of our state and the vastness of really the Refuge System, from the Alaska Peninsula or the Aleutians [Islands] to the Arctic or to the western coast. And by seeing the Refuge System, I mean you appreciate what you have.

My favorite memories honestly at this point they usually involve a dog team. And probably one of my more special experiences, although a little bit dangerous I'd have to say, is probably five years ago I was on the Arctic Refuge over near Accomplishment Creek area probably. I was traveling with my dog team and a friend's dog team. We had mushed in, we decided we were only going to do like a three day scenic trip. We came off the Dalton Highway, put in right there and headed over. We were lucky enough that year we didn't have to use a lot of snowshoes. The wind had blown quite a bit, there was still snow up there, so the dogs can actually scamper across that crusted snow quite well, which I'll tell you is very good leader training. You tell a leader they have to go left or right a little bit when there's no trail, and they'll sure listen up to you.

We were out there one night, it was great, fabulous. I'm coming into the valley of Accomplishment Creek with the huge mountains up on either side. We actually had come across, startled a wolf pack that was eating a caribou carcass, and they had run up the side of the hill and looked back down on us. They don't often see a bunch of dogs coming in running after them, chasing them off their caribou. One of them actually barked at us; we had five of them howling and one barking. So, I thought that was interesting that a wolf was barking. But we kept going up into the creek, and that night set up some tents, and the weather started coming down in on us pretty nasty. Probably those days I wasn't as worried about checking on the weather and seeing what was going to come up behind us, and it sure did, it socked us in. It started blowing, blowing almost our tent over. You looked out the window, looked out at your team, and all you could see were these basically humps in snow where they had their back turned to the wind and their nose tucked down in their tail. They were comfortable. But boy I tell you what, our night wasn't very comfortable.

We sat up there for a little while, but there's only a certain amount of food and you have to keep feeding the dogs quite a bit when it's that cold. So, we decided that we aught to turn around and head back out on that same trail that we had come in on. Well, you could no longer see the valley and you couldn't really see the mountains. It was actually

a severe whiteout, so you couldn't differentiate the ground from the air, but it was still very sunny.

I had a pair of sunglasses, but my mushing friend did not, and we had about probably I think 12-13 miles to go to get back to the truck, where we had parked it on the road. We had a long day, including a couple of different leaders up in front because there was no longer really a trail, and the farthest that you could see from your sled was basically your dogs in the back. You could not see your leaders. And what I kept doing as a mistake was I would run up in front and I would walk on the trail and try to find it until I'm, 'Okay, here's your trail, here's your trail.' I think I learned later what I was doing was I was ruining their scent. They were looking for the trail that they had come out on. And dogs being dogs, they were relying on their nose. And as I walked on it, I was ruining that. So, about halfway out I decided, 'Boy, we're getting no where." So I put an old leader up there, his name is Woody, and I left him alone, and about three or four hours later he found the truck. And everything worked out except my mushing friend was blind for about the next four days, he burned his eyes quite well.

I know the feeling, I've done it myself.

Aliy Zirkle:
I have not. That experience, all it did was remind me to throw a very cheap pair of non-breakable sunglasses into my sled, regardless of whether it's January or April.

But that was five years ago on Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. I really have a feeling for that place in my heart. I've had good trips up there, bad trips, and that one, you know, is honestly right in the middle. It left me with a lot of respect for the place, but I've seen it as I couldn't have imagined it unless I saw it that way.

That's a neat experience anytime you do get to see wolves in the wild.

Aliy Zirkle:
Oh yeah, yeah. That's the one thing that's very lucky about traveling with dogs, is that you're not coming up behind them with a snow machine, scaring them off the trail. I've seen I wouldn't say, hundreds or anything, but they don't run off as much. And sometimes if you're camping, they'll come in and start howling with your dogs and boy, there's nothing more sacred than that, really.

Oh wow, really, howling with the dogs?

Aliy Zirkle:
Yeah, I was in the Brooks Range and we were camped on a little lake, kind of at the top of a pass, Tinucook, around that area. And we had a group of dog teams, because I was actually out with a little bit of a tourist group; I think I had three or four teams, small teams, only four dogs each. And we had bedded them down already and I'd given them a big meal. They were laying on their spruce bows and they started howling, and then from across the lake this lone howl came out, and it was one wolf. It wasn't in a pack or

anything, so probably a pretty young guy. He actually started kind of coming around the team, and the dogs were a little startled at first. And then as they realized he was just kind of checking them out from a distance, never got any closer, they were pretty comfortable with it. So, it was great. Yeah, I tried to make it out to the tourists, "Oh, this happens all the time." No! "Oh, I see them all the time."

I've got names for them! Oh wow, well I think you probably maybe... I don't know, if you had another instance where you... I guess, what would be the most enjoyable thing about Alaska's National Wildlife Refuges? Is it the opportunity to get your dogs out? We all have different ideas.

Aliy Zirkle:
Well, nowhere else in the world can a person really come upon and enjoy the wilderness like it was thousands of years ago. Basically, the Refuge System by keeping it as it is, yet allowing people to enjoy it as they always have, you know, helps with that. I mean, for instance, we were talking about the Yukon River, I mean I personally travel much of the Yukon River in it's frozen state, mind you, and really observing and experiencing it's grandeur. All you can do is get a sense of awe out of that, really. I think that the National Wildlife Refuge System and the wilderness, I mean basically they're a part of us that we need to keep there. When we start losing that, we start losing big chunks of ourselves. And it's so obvious that elsewhere that that has happened. So that we do have to realize that it has, and that it could, so that we have to keep it as it is, really.

Well said, yeah. I think coming from someone who has lived in Philadelphia, you know, I think that we should all take heed of your message and appreciate what we have. Because, you know, what will Alaska be like in one hundred years with and without the Refuge System? If there was no Refuge System, basically no federal land units in Alaska...

Aliy Zirkle:
Where would we be, yeah? Where would in a hundred, a hundred and fifty, whatever. Yeah, yeah I think that's exactly what we want to convey in these radio commercials, is the National Wildlife Refuge System and Alaska's Refuges are, some people don't like the word, "Preserve" but I think Alaska Refuges, that's basically what we're doing. We're preserving large land units that maybe our culture wishes we had done and we had saved in the lower 48. We lost our chance, and that's what makes Alaska's refuges very special.

Very good Aliy, I think you hit the nail on the head. That kind of brings me to this question about; I think I wrote here, 'What do you think Alaskans can do to help insure their refuges will be around for future generations?' And I know you've actually worked for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; I think there are around 3,000 people in the United States who work for the U.S. Refuge Systems (National Wildlife Refuge Systems). So, most people won't get an opportunity to work for a refuge system, but there's other things that people can do to insure that the Refuge System stays intact and stays funded and is doing what it was established for many, many years ago.

The Refuge System was established in 1903 by Theodore Roosevelt, with the intentions of saving pelicans and some other birds from being slaughtered to extinction. And now we've grown to a greater, more broad cause. Do you have any comments on what you think Alaskans can do in Alaska to help protect our refuges for future generations?

Aliy Zirkle:
Well, I do. Basically, I believe Alaskans as well as all Americans simply put, especially after yesterday, should do their simple civic duties like voting and being a part of our great democratic government, really.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Refuge System is my government agency, it's your government agency. So, we as a nation have to stand behind it if is something that we truly believe in. And, you know, you have to vocally stand behind it. You don't have to just go along for the ride and realize it's there and say, "Oh, it's always going to be there," because something could happen. So, vocally make a stand of what you feel is right.

And then the other thing is use it, use your Refuge System. A lot of people, and I've heard this excuse, is that a lot of our Refuge System in Alaska are "cut off from the public" or not very accessible. But, honestly, in Alaskan terminology, that is not true. You know as well as I that you can get on an airplane to anywhere. That if you want to go to Yukon Flats; Fort Yukon is like taking an airplane from Fairbanks to Fort Yukon is like taking a cab from Manhattan to the Bronx. There are some roads that do bring us up to Arctic, one road that brings us up to Arctic.

So, get out there and appreciate what you have, because it's doable. Whether that's because you're hunting, you're fishing or you're floating, or you're just enjoying the outdoors, it is set up so that it's usable, you know. Most of our refuges have some kind of a village as a headquarters. By golly, the Alaskan taxi (the airplane) is going to get you to wherever you want to go. It might cost you a little bit more here or there, but you know, honestly it's worth it. To get out there to Galena and see the Yukon River, go to Grayling, you know, Kotzebue. If you've never been there, holy cow, it's something that a person aught to see in their lifetime, especially if they live in Alaska. Don't just live in Anchorage and live in Fairbanks and appreciate what you have there and look at all the photographs, and then have some family come up and tour the interior and say, "Boy, that Yukon River is great!" And you say, "Well, I've never even seen the Yukon." Get out there and appreciate it.

And then lastly, as I think about all the employees (you say there's 3,000 employees with the National System) personally, I know most of these employees are pretty into what they do. I mean, they don't have this job because they want to sit around in a building under some artificial lighting and work on reports or what have you. They want to get out and they want to work with the refuge so that it can stay for years and years. And what you can do, if you're interested in certain aspects of the Refuge System, is go to talk to these people. I mean, everyone is approachable, and most of these people have a passion for what they're doing, that they want to talk to you about it. If you want to go hunt Three-Day Slough, or you want to go up to Arctic and see if you can catch a glimpse

of the muskoxen, you want to see some sheep, or you'd like to go down the Kobuk River and see what kind of sheefish you can find. Go talk to people. I mean, yes there are guides out there and there are people that can help you out.

But honestly, the employees of U.S. Fish and Wildlife are national employees, they work for you, and they would like to tell you about what you can see and what you can appreciate. And they'll give you a realistic view of it too.

Thank you very much. That was an added bonus I wasn't expecting.

Aliy Zirkle:
Oh, it's kind of true.

Yeah, yeah, I mean you actually touched on something that needed to be addressed. I hadn't thought of that, but it often comes up, you're right. People sometimes view us as bureaucrats and machines, unapproachable.

Aliy Zirkle:
I think Fish and Wildlife is oftentimes, I mean yes, it's bureaucratic, it's a government setup, but the people are so into what they do. It's not like you go to work everyday and you're like, 'Ho hum, here we go again.' Most of the people are... I don't know, Cathy Kerby or something like, I mean how into your job can you be in order to... A little too, like enthusiasm out the wazoo!

The old saying, 'Eat, sleep, and breathe what you do,' and that's the people here at this office, this building, and all the Refuge System.

I don't know if you were able ever to go to a national meeting of Fish and Wildlife Service employees. It's pretty amazing to be in a room of employees from all over the country and you can just feel the enthusiasm. The Refuge Academy brings together these young, enthusiastic employees from across the country, not just refuges but from other offices and you spend three weeks together. You just talk about bonding experiences.

Aliy Zirkle:
Oh yeah, and everyone wants to go to Alaska probably.

Exactly, but if they go to Kotzebue...

Aliy Zirkle:
Then they might have an "in." I see where you're coming from.

I regret never being able to jump on a sled dog team in Kotzebue and go out. I often would be out on a snow machine and would pass a team on the Kobuk or on the Noatak and I would think, 'What a special way to travel this country.' It was just... I traveled by snow machine begrudgingly, you know, I needed to get out of Kotzebue and get out in the

country, and it was my only real way to do it. And boy did I always think about the sled dog teams and I forget the name of the guy that placed really well...

Aliy Zirkle:
John Baker.

John Baker, yeah, his team was just a couple blocks away. I'd watch him take off in the mornings and come in at dark and I'd think, 'Oh, I bet he saw some neat country.'

Aliy Zirkle:
Oh yeah, and him being up there his whole life and training up there. I think about what a different scenarios he's got than I do, you know, and we're in the same state. It's just amazing.

Yeah, yeah. I'm sure you're riding trails through spruce, soft snow, and no wind. And John's out there...

Aliy Zirkle:
Yep, by the time we get to Shaktoolik he leaves me in the dust; I just have to get ahead of him on the Yukon!

Shaktoolik I guess is where you get into the flat, open country.

Aliy Zirkle:
Yeah, Unalakleet and then Shaktoolik basically.

How do you get the nerve to cross over to Nome across the ice?

Aliy Zirkle:
I think it's just a... I don't know, I mean you don't even think about it. Of course you know you're on the ice because you're out there and you see these dim lights of Elim sitting out there in front of you. But, you know, you have a sense that you're just traveling and that a hundred years ago Seppala did the same thing. And he had circumstances where his dog went gee, just because they needed to go to gee, and went around open leads. I'm not saying my dogs would necessarily do that, but there's a certain amount of faith that you have to put into your team. And then there's a certain amount of risk that you have to do in order to do a race that's a thousand miles. Probably just like any kind of thing where you're really trying to push you and your comrades as hard as you can, really.

Yeah, yeah I guess about anything we do in Alaska have some risks.

Aliy Zirkle:
Really, it really does, and everything's always harder than you thought it was going to be.

Yeah, exactly. Yeah, I think Sunday afternoon proved that we're in a unique place.

Aliy Zirkle:
Oh yeah, holy cow! That was great. I mean in a world sense, you know, in a planetary sense it was awesome. You don't experience that all the time. And after my house stood up and everything I was ecstatic. I mean during it I was a little nervous, but I mean...

What a ride!

Well Aliy, I should let you go. I bet the dogs are... Are you on snow? Are you finding places to run on snow?

Aliy Zirkle:
I actually am not on a sled. I've been training still with an ATV four-wheeler. But we have some good trails out here; I just put a bridge in over a creek, so I actually have a 20-mile training run that's nice. I've been running them with the booties since it's kind of a little bit, well it's a little hard on some of their feet with the ice turned a little bit into glass. But, you know, I'm hoping for snow in the next little while. It sounds like it might get cold. But, you know, Alaska's is what it is, so it's going to give us what it wants to give us and we're just going to stand here and smile because there's absolutely nothing we can do about it.

No, and what a wonderful place to live.

Aliy Zirkle:
It is, so if I can just keep remembering that it will be a great season.

Well, I'll be listening to the updates on the races coming up and I wish you the best. And thank you, it was really enjoyable.

Aliy Zirkle:
Well, I'll say hello to all of your friends in Kotzebue for you next time I'm there.

Yeah, say hi John as you pass him!

Aliy Zirkle:
Okay, that's a deal.

Thanks Aliy, you have a good day.

UNVERIFIED:

KEY WORDS:
People: Aliy Zirkle; Barb Armstrong; Barry Whitehill; Mary Maxwell; Patsy Martin; Rachel Brubaker; Theodore Roosevelt; Cathy Kerby; John Baker; Leonhard Seppala

Places: Kotzebue; Teller; Nome; Anchorage; Kobuk; Noatak; Bettles; Kanuti National Wildlife Refuge; Allakaket; Tinicum, Pennsylvania; John Heinz National Wildlife Refuge; Two Rivers, Alaska; King Salmon; Alaska Peninsula Becharof National Wildlife Refuge; Ugashik Narrows; Aleutian Islands; Arctic; Accomplishment Creek; Dalton Highway; Arctic National Wildlife Refuge; Brooks Range; Yukon Flats; Fort Yukon; Fairbanks; Galena; Yukon River; Grayling; Kobuk River; Three-Day Slough Area; Shaktoolik; Unalakleet; Elim;

Divisions/Titles/Programs/Studies: Offices Assistance Management; biologist; biotech; Wolf census; moose census; BBS (Breeding Bird Survey) Route; PSA (Public Service Announcement) Campaign; SCA (Student Conservation Association); catch and release program; U.S. Refuge System; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service;

Wildlife/Critters: Wolf; moose; grayling; husky dogs; muskoxen; sheep; sheefish;

Miscellaneous: SP Kennel